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ILLUMINATION¹

BY CHARLES H. GRANDGENT

I

O imaginativa, che ne rube
Talvolta sì di fuor ch'uom non s'accorge
Perchè d'intorno suonin mille tube,
Chi muove te, se il senso non ti porge?
Muoveti lume che nel ciel s'informa
Per sè o per voler che giù lo scorge?

Purg., xvii, 13-18.

Was Dante inspired—not in the figurative, literary way, as when we call Shakespeare or Goethe an inspired poet; but really filled with the breath of the Lord, and speaking his message, as spake Moses, David, and Paul? The distinction between intellectual and divine illumination, though often blurred by the sophistry of unavowed skepticism, is clear enough to a clear-thinking mind, and was clearly recognized by Dante.

At the outset of his *Inferno* this Dante appeals to the Muses, who, as he has explained, in his *Vita Nuova* (Ch. xxv), are merely a poetic personification of the poet's art:

O Muses, soaring genius, aid me now!

Inf., ii, 7.

Again, on the threshold of his *Purgatorio* he appeals to the same power:

¹Read at the Dante Commemoration Exercises, University of North Carolina, February 9, 1921.

But now let buried poesy arise,
 O sacred Muses! Yours alone am I.
 Calliope, draw nearer to the skies!

Purg., I, 7-9.

Calliope, leader of the Muses, inspirer of epic verse, patroness of style and elocution, had long since been thus invoked by Virgil, Dante's master:

Thee I beseech, Calliope: breathe on the soul of the singer!
Æneid, IX, 525.

But the song of Heaven, the *Paradiso*, calls higher for help:

O good Apollo, fill me with thy power
 For this concluding work, that I may get
 Deservingly the precious laurel dower!
 One peak of old Parnassus hath as yet
 Sufficed for me, but now I need them both
 To meet the crowning task that still is set.

Par., I, 13-18.

Two summits, or two ridges, cap the mountain of song, as Lucan and Lucian tell us. One of these Dante assigns as a dwelling to the Muses, or human art; the other to Apollo, or art divine. For his last voyage the bold traveler needs every guidance, earthly and heavenly: godlike wisdom must fill his sails, godlike artistry must stand at the helm, while sage Poetics shall chart his course by the stars:

The sea I sail was never sailed before.
 Minerva breathes, Apollo guides my ship;
 And Muses nine the northern stars explore.

Par., II, 7-9.

Now, in one sense, all products of the talent of man are of divine origin; for every human soul, when the body is born, is created by God, with its special powers of insight and comprehension; and every human mind is shaped by the stars that preside over its nativity, these stars being the instruments of the angels, God's ministers, who execute his eternal plan.

The spheres of nature, stamping their impress
 On mortal wax, without respect to place
 Or person, rightly do their business.

Par., VIII, 127-129.

When Dante, in his journey through the heavens, reaches the last visible sphere, the sphere of the fixed stars, he there enters his native constellation of Gemini, source of learning and literary skill :

O glorious stars, which teem eternally
 With mighty power, O light to which I owe
 My genius, wholly, such as it may be,
 With you arose the sun and went below
 (The sun, progenitor of mortal life),
 When first I felt the Tuscan breezes blow.
Par., xxii, 112-117.

Both nature and divine grace had favored Dante: the stars had given him talent, God had given him vision. As Beatrice declares :

Thanks to the whirl of giant wheels on high,
 Which every seed to this or that incline
 According to the stars that fill the sky,—
 And thanks to bounteous dower of grace divine,
 Which rains from clouds so far from mortal view
 Mine eyes shall ne'er behold them, nor shall thine,—
 This man had in him, when his life was new,
 Such potency that every gladsome gift
 Might well have proved in him its promise true.
Purg., xxx, 109-117.

But the use we make of our qualities depends on ourselves. Whether our acts and words be good or evil, whether the seed implanted in us shall ripen to sweet or bitter fruit, the merit or the guilt is our own; for we have conscience and free will. If we fail, the stars are not to blame.

Subject in freedom to a mightier Soul
 A higher Nature, ye derive from it
 Intelligence, beyond the stars' control.
Purg., xvi, 79-81.

It follows that the poet's utterances, drawn from his special range of vision, fashioned by his free choice, can base no claim to inspiration on the God-given wit without which they never could have been. They are the words of the individual man, not of his Maker.

Real inspiration is something quite different: it is the voice of God dictating a message, which the prophet receives and delivers. This voice, this light have in the past come to many, even to some who were outside the fold. Theologians early recognized that

those ancient Greek philosophers whose doctrines are so strangely akin to Christian teaching may have been partially illumined by a miracle of grace. To a like wonder the Sibyls may have owed their supernatural gift of prophecy. One may even be an inspired prophet unawares, as was Vergil when he wrote his Fourth Eclogue.

Thou didst as one who fareth forth by night
With lantern held behind, which helps not him,
But after him the people leads aright.

Purg., xxii, 67-69.

In Dante's Limbus, whose dark air is a-quiver with longing eternally unfulfilled, the abode of virtuous heathen and unbaptized children, stands a Noble Castle brightly illuminated; there dwell the great sages and heroes who, knowing not the true faith, received nevertheless some measure of divine enlightenment.

The honorable fame rëechoing
And heralding their names to mortal ears
Wins grace in Heaven, and such reward doth bring.

Inf., iv, 76-78.

By the most famous of the illumined poets of old, Dante is received as a fellow. With Virgil at his side, he meets Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan.

They spake together for a little while,
Then turned to me with hospitable hand;
My master watched their welcome with a smile.
Still more they did—an honor great and grand!
For they received me in their company,
And I was sixth in that enlightened band.

Inf., iv, 97-102.

Dante, who was no fool, knew well enough that he was a fit companion for the finest singers of antiquity; he knew well enough that since ancient Greece and Rome no one had sung as he did; and he knew also that he could sing of sacred things beyond the reach of any other poet, ancient or modern.

O ye who, following in little boats,
Eager to listen, have been led away
Behind my ship, which singeth as it floats,
Go back and seek your shores while yet ye may!
Tempt not the main; for, losing sight of me,
Ye haply on the deep were left astray.

Par., ii, 1-6.

Did he ever ask himself, I wonder, whether it could be that the breath of the Lord had breathed upon him, whether some remnant of the grace bestowed on the Hebrew prophets—even upon pagan philosophers and poets—had descended upon him? Would such a thought have been presumptuous?

Dante was on his guard against presumption; he recognized pride as his besetting sin. How sympathetically he depicts those sinners whose downfall was due to pride of intellect, to misuse of a special gift of nature and grace! Imperishable is the image of Farinata, the haughty heretic,

Standing aloft with breast and brow erect,
As held he Hell in fathomless contempt.

Inf., x, 35-36.

To the mystic seer, Joachim of Calabria, whose prophetic flights were sometimes of dubious orthodoxy, and to the audacious philosopher, Sigier of Brabant, whose orthodoxy, in one important matter, was worse than doubtful, he assigns a place in Heaven, among the lights of theology. Unforgettable is the poet's pity as he gazes on the distorted forms of the magicians and soothsayers, another class of beings exceptionally endowed:

Think, reader, for thyself, so God allow
Thee profit from thy reading, think, I say,
How I could keep mine eyes unmoistened now.

Indeed I wept, against a boulder prest
That edged the rocky ridge, until my guide
Exclaimed: "Art still as foolish as the rest?"

Inf., xx, 19-27.

Presently return to memory, flame-enveloped, the evil counselors, entrusted with the perilous gift of eloquence, among them the indomitable Ulysses, most romantic of all figures in the *Divine Comedy*.

Then sorrowed I, and sorrow now again,
When I recall the sight that grieves me still;
And more than ever I my wit restrain
Nor let it run without the check of will,
Lest whatsoever good a friendly star
Or something higher hath given, I turn to ill.

Inf., xxvi, 19-24.

And we know that he succeeded. Ere the end, he had subdued pride, we know: for, on high, Beatrice avers that her disciple possesses hope, the certain expectation of future blessedness (*Par.*, xxv, 52-54); and he has already been assured (*Par.*, x, 87) that no man once admitted to Paradise descends to earth without promise of return. Vainglory he has banished, at least from his great poem. However he may have longed to be the recipient of a divine mission, he never proclaims himself a mouthpiece of God. For grace to make the most of his own uncommon aptitude he ardently prayed; and if from time to time he wondered whether any of the heavenly words that sprang to his lips were whispered from above, he let drop no hint of it, save perhaps in the little passage *ond'io principio piglio*:

Imagination, which dost often steal
The outer world from us, and not a shrill
Is heard, tho' close a thousand trumpets peal,
Who wakes thee, if the senses all are still?
Wakes thee a light engendered in the stars
Spontaneously, or by directing Will?
Purg., xvii, 13-18.

II

O vero isfavillar del santo spiro!
Come si fece subito e candente
Agli occhi miei, che vinti non soffriro!
Par., xiv, 76-78.

Of inner illumination, the inspiration of inborn genius, Dante had no lack and no doubt. I shall not now discourse of his skill as a craftsman: let us dismiss the Muses of poetry and look to Apollo, leader of the spirit. Considered as a spiritual guide, Dante may be called a mystic realist. His peculiar talent lies in the transmutation of closely observed real phenomena into mystic message. The material facts of life he clearly sees, and confronts them sturdily as facts; but he discerns in them a supersensual significance, an allegorical, moral, anagogical meaning. Thus the book of life, without ceasing to be a true story, becomes a volume of symbols. In its double function, life is like the Bible, as seen by its symbolist expositors. Not the Bible alone, but also the *Iliad* used to be so expounded; likewise the *Æneid*, the *Metamorphoses*, and other masterpieces.

For Dante, then, the world is full of hidden teachings, which it is his business to discover and impart. Cato and Martia, for instance, were historical people, who had a literal existence, but their career contained a cryptic lesson unsuspected by themselves; for the return of Martia to her first husband, Cato, after the death of Hortensius, is a symbol of the reversion of the noble human soul to God in old age. Even so in our own lives, and in the lives of those about us, lurk mystic meanings visible to those who have eyes to see.

Once, in his youth, Dante wrote for his friend, Guido Cavalcanti, a dainty compliment to two damsels, in the form of a sonnet. Out of courtesy to the recipient he naturally put the name of Guido's sweetheart before that of his own. In later years, when he was re-editing this sonnet and meditating over it, he detected in the order of the names a mysterious correspondence with the facts: for, on the occasion which gave rise to the poem, the first mentioned young lady, whose name was Joan, had walked a little ahead of the second mentioned, Mistress Bice, even as her masculine namesake, John the Baptist, had preceded Christ. The first maiden had indeed been named Joan simply because she was predestined to walk before Beatrice on this particular momentous occasion.

In events seemingly trivial may lie a solemn portent. I have ventured to guess that the mysterious number nine, which (as the square of the Trinity) is conceived by the author to represent a miracle, and which persistently haunts the relations of Beatrice to Dante through the prose exegesis of the *New Life*, originated in the apparent chance that impelled our poet to give Bice the ninth place in a boyish versified enumeration of the sixty most beautiful ladies of Florence.

Now let us consider one striking but typical example of the poet's illumination, his gift of transforming real experience into spiritual symbolism. Two circumstances of Dante's life brought him into close affinity with St. Paul. One was his attempt to visualize the glories of Heaven, an effort to transport himself thither in imagination, following Beatrice, who had been taken from earth. "I knew a man," says St. Paul (II Corinthians, xii, 2-4), " . . . how that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter."

This rapture he does not relate, because, he declares, "it is not expedient for me doubtless to glory." Likewise Dante, excusing himself for his failure to narrate the passing of his most gentle lady, alleges that "it is not meet for me to treat thereof, inasmuch as in such treatment I must needs be a praiser of myself, which is altogether unmeet and blameworthy in him who does it" (*Vita Nuova*, Ch. xxix). Afterwards, indeed, he did publish his maturer vision in the *Divine Comedy*; for self-praise is justifiable "when from discourse of one's self very great utility to others ensues by way of instruction; which reason moved Augustine in his *Confessions* to speak of himself" (*Convivio*, I, ii). On his heavenly journey Dante knows not whether he was nothing but soul, the last created part of man, or soul and body together:

Whether alone that part of me was I
Which thou, Heaven-ruling Love, didst last create,
Thou know'st, whose splendor lifted me on high.

Par., I, 73-75.

The same doubt was in the mind of St. Paul: "whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth."

The other common experience was a temporary loss of sight, an affliction that miraculously befell Saul on his way to Damascus, as is related in Acts ix, 3-18: "And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus, and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth. . . . And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. And he was there three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink." During these days, it was believed, he had his vision of Paradise. Dante's blinding, as told in the *Convivio*, III, ix, was neither total nor supernatural: "Greatly wearying my eyes with assiduous reading, I so weakened my powers of sight that the stars looked to me clouded, all of them, by a sort of white blur. By long rest in dark, cool places, and by cooling the ball of the eye with pure water, I fixed once more the scattered faculty and recovered my former good condition of sight." In the *Vita Nuova* (Ch. xi) Dante poetically attributes another like mishap, not to study, but to assiduous weeping: "By this rekindling of sighs was rekindled my assuaged tearfulness to such a degree that mine eyes

looked like two things whose only desire was to weep; and by long continuance of weeping there came around them a purple color, such as often appears from suffering of some kind."

Mine eyes are vanquisht, and have lost the strength
To look at one who may return their gaze.

Vita Nuova, Sonnet XXXI.

In these accounts, indeed, there is no suggestion of a similarity to the blinding of Saul, who for a brief time lost his earthly sight that his spiritual vision might be brighter. It is only when the poet turns his physical accident to account in providing detail for religious symbolism that his case becomes parallel to that of St. Paul. In the allegory of Paradise, Dante, too, is blinded that he may see the clearer; during the unseeing interval, the doctrine of love is expounded. The blindness has come without warning:

What consternation set my soul astir,
When, turning to contemplate Beatrice,
I could not see her more, tho' close to her
I still remained, and in the world of bliss!

Par., xxv, 136-139.

His sight has been quenched by a glowing flame (the effulgence of St. John, exponent of love), into which he has intently gazed; not until he turns about to look at other things does he become aware, to his amazement, that he is blind. Presently he sees again, and better; but still not well enough. Once more, on entering the Empyrean, the real Heaven of spirit, Dante's vision is clarified by momentary extinction:

Thus round about me shined a living light
Which left me covered o'er with such a veil
Of brilliancy that nothing met my sight.

Par., xxx, 49-51.

Again and again, in the *Purgatorio* and in the *Paradiso*, we find the poet blinded or dazzled by an intense light.

As now to us the bird of Heaven did fare,
The nearer he, the brighter did he shine;
And when he came, 't was more than eye could bear.

Purg., II, 37-39.

The dazzling objects in Purgatory are angels, ministers of divine illumination.

The sight of him had snatcht mine eyes away;
 And I fell in behind my leaders twain,
 Like one who walks by ear as best he may.
Purg., xxiv, 142-144.

One angel, hidden in its own light, sings a greeting.

We heard within a light that stood aglow:
 "Venite, benedicti Patris mei."
 I could not look, it overcame me so.
Purg., xxvii, 58-60.

Another, with a face of unbearable brilliancy, holds in his hand a naked sword,

Toward us reflecting all its rays so keen
 That more than once I vainly turned my eyes.
Purg., ix, 83-84.

In Paradise, whose tenuous fabric is chiefly light and music, the dazzling is of course more frequent. The effulgence may proceed from a saint,

So fiery sharp it overwhelmed my sight.
Par., xxv, 27.

It may shine from Beatrice:

She flasht upon my turning eye so quick
 My sense at first could not endure the strain.
Par., iii, 128-129.

Again it emanates from Christ:

And thro' the living sheen came shining bright
 The gleaming Substance, with such clarity
 Mine eye, which saw, could not endure the sight.
Par., xxiii, 31-33.

Sometimes, in Dante's fancy, the blinding object is the sun:

As sunshine bows the eyes with heaviness
 And veils itself with brightness overdone,
 My strength was now unequal to the stress.
Purg., xvii, 52-54.

Noteworthy is this realistic touch—the sensation of weight over the brows. It occurs again:

Mid-nose exactly fell the solar rays,—
 For round the mountain we had circled so
 That we were facing straight the sunset blaze,—

When, worse than I had felt in all the glow,
 A heaviness descended on my brow,
 Amazing me, because I did not know.

Purg., xv, 7-12.

What Dante did not know is that the sudden increase of light, with its effect of weight, was due to the approach of a shining angel. On another occasion the crushing light comes from two of the Disciples, Peter and James, whom Dante metaphorically designates as the hills unto which he lifts up his eyes:

Thus comforts me St. Peter's flaming mate;
 Wherefore I lift mine eyes unto the hills,
 Which erst had bowed them with excessive weight.

Par., xxv, 37-39.

The inadequacy of the human eye to bear the direct light of the sun is a familiar thought to Dante.

As sunshine in the eye that quivers most.

Par., xxx, 25.

In the *Vita Nuova* (Ch. XLII) he says: "Our intellect is to those blessed souls as our feeble eye is to the sun." And in the second *canzone* of the *Convivio*, vv. 59-60:

These things our understanding overpower,
 E'en as a ray of sun a fragile eye.

A symbolic sun is no less overpowering:

O kindly Power, that shapest with thy light,
 Thou didst depart aloft to spare mine eyes,
 Whose strength did not suffice for such a sight.

Par., xxiii, 85-87.

As we have noted, the glory of the angels, God's ministers, is beyond human vision:

Mine eyes discerned aright each golden tress,
 But could not rightly see the shining face—
 Like any power confounded by excess.

Purg., viii, 34-36.

In these passages we have encountered sundry details remarkable for their verity: the blurring of the sight, the sense of oppression just above the brows, the inclination to bend the eyes down, the sudden terror that is felt on looking about and finding one's self

blinded. Another touch, still more intimate, occurs in the last canto of the poem: the feeling that, having once mastered the fearful brilliancy and fixed one's eyes on the light, it is useless to turn elsewhere:

So sharply cut mine eyes the living ray,
I think that I had nothing seen at all,
If I from it my sight had turned away.

Par., xxxiii, 76-78.

Where did Dante get this knowledge? We are sure that he was an adept in astronomy; we are almost certain that he performed an experiment in optics with a light and three mirrors (*Par.*, II, 94-105); we are amazed at the accuracy with which he could describe the course of the sun (*Conv.*, III, v). In *Convivio*, II, x, he shows a pretty clear understanding of the mechanism of sight. The *Divine Comedy*, too, contains a couple of arresting passages which reveal study of the eye:

A sudden glare awakens us from sleep,
With sense of sight intent to meet the gleam
Which membrane after membrane pierces deep.

Par., xxvi, 70-72.

The second one is still more curious in its portrayal of the same phenomenon, regarded from the standpoint of consciousness:

When all at once a sudden flash of light
On sleeping eyes doth knock, our slumber breaks,
But, broken, quivers ere it perish quite.

Purg., xvii, 40-42.

It is natural to connect Dante's interest in the eye and the phenomena of sight with the passing infirmity whereof mention has been made. He was inevitably concerned with sight because his sight had been marred and threatened. Is it over bold on our part to conjecture a more special experience than the incident he discloses? Fond star-gazer that he was, did he ever imprudently turn his gaze on the sun? In his allegory, at least, he did so, while standing in the Garden of Eden beside Beatrice, who set the example:

In quick response I did what she had done,
When I had caught the image of her act:
Beyond our wont I stared into the sun.

Much strength is there which human sense hath lackt
 Since Adam fell; because that favored spot
 Was made for man when man was still intact.
 I could not bear it long; but yielded not
 Until I saw it sparkle all around
 Like iron drawn from furnace boiling hot.
 Then suddenly was day to daylight bound
 (So it appeared), as if the One who Can
 A second sun to deck the sky had found.

Par., I, 52-63.

If without glorying it is meet for me to speak of myself, it so happens that I am able to verify the accuracy of Dante's observations; for once, in a moment of rashness, I stared at the sun. It was on Oct. 20, 1892, when a partial eclipse was observable in Boston. I had forgotten the impending event; but suddenly noticing the diminution of light, I thoughtlessly looked up, and then, being in a quiet street, fascinated as it were by curiosity, I kept my eyes fixed on the waning orb. The first sensation was painful; a dizziness, a heaviness over the brows, an almost irresistible pressure to lower the eyes. Presently, however, these symptoms passed away, and I was able to look steadily without the least discomfort, even with a certain sense of exhilaration, but with a vague misgiving that it would not do to avert my gaze. What surprised me most was that light and dark was transposed, the obscured section of the disk showing a luminous gray, the unshaded part nearly black. After watching the strange sight for some time with satisfaction, I turned to walk home, and discovered, to my chagrin, that I could hardly see. As Dante says,

That temporary impotence to see
 Which blinds an eye just stricken by the sun
 All sightless for the moment rendered me.

Purg., xxxii, 10-12.

All was dim; barely could I find my way. Some days of rest and darkness were needed to restore my sight; for weeks I could not discern the letters on a printed page; and for months afterward I could not endure anything white or shining. Instinctively I avoided persons wearing white garments. Once, in the sunshine, I unexpectedly encountered an old gentleman with long white hair and beard, whose glare upset me for a good bit. Dante's angels always make me think of him. Oddly enough, I was so ashamed

of my folly that I confessed it only to my oculist and two or three others; and to this day I have told it to very few. Most people thought that my brief disability was caused by overstudy.

Now let us return to the passage that narrates Dante's misadventure (*Conv.*, III, ix): "Such an appearance may be due also to the organ of sight, namely the eye, which by sickness or fatigue is affected by some particular coloring or enfeeblement. It often happens, for example, that when the coat of the pupil is reddened by the corruption of some infirmity, things almost all look ruddy; and so the stars appear colored. When sight is enfeebled, too, there occurs a certain scattering of sense, so that things do not appear united but scattered, very nearly as our writing looks on damp paper. That is why many people, when they read, hold the writ far enough away from their eyes for the image to reach them more easily and sharply, and thereby the letter becomes clearer to their sight. For this reason even the stars may appear murky. Whereof I had experience the very year in which this poem (*Conv.*, Canz. 2) came into the world; for greatly wearying my eyes with assiduous reading, I so weakened my powers of sight that the stars looked to me clouded, all of them, by a sort of white blur. By long rest in dark, cool places, and by cooling the ball of the eye with pure water, I fixed once more the scattered faculty and recovered my former good condition of sight."

The poem in question, *Amor che nella mente mi ragiona*, was composed after the first *canzone* of the *Convivio*, namely *Voi che intendendo il terzo ciel movete*, which, in turn, being cited in the *Paradiso* (VIII, 37) by the young prince Carlo Martello, must have been written before his death in 1295, and probably saw the light not long before his visit to Florence in the spring of 1294. Our poem, then, *Amor che nella mente mi ragiona*, would doubtless fall somewhere in 1295; and that would be the year in which Dante's sight was impaired. Now, it appears that on Dec. 8, 1295, there was a partial eclipse of the sun, visible in Italy. At this point let us recall a significant reference to a partial eclipse in the *Divine Comedy*. The word "eclipse" occurs in two other places, but in neither has it the appositeness it has in this passage, wherein Dante is seen trying to penetrate with his eyes the light that envelops St. John:

As one who stares and strives with all his might
To see the sun eclipsed to some degree,
And who by seeing robs himself of sight,
Thus I before that latest brilliancy;
Until I heard: "To see an absent thing
Whose place is elsewhere, why dost dazzle thee?"

Par., xxv, 118-123.

If the happening I have imagined be true,—and even if it be not, even if Dante needed no eclipse to hurt his eyes,—we may see, in all that has preceded, the difference between an illumined poet and an ordinary man. What to the latter is a trivial incident, annoying, perhaps mortifying, but commonplace, is by inspired genius so transmuted that it comes to represent the refinement of vision from physical sight to mental comprehension, and from comprehension to intuition or immediate perception, until the seer shall no longer see through a glass, darkly, but face to face.

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